

2020

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Recommended Citation

Arceta, Katherine B. (2020) "Mount Banahaw's Enigma of Power: A Personal Reflection on Signs and Symbols at the Santa Lucia Complex," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 8: Iss. 5, Article 5.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol8/iss5/5>

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Mount Banahaw's Enigma of Power: A Personal Reflection on Signs and Symbols at the Santa Lucia Complex

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In the Philippines, Mount Banahaw in Quezon province is a pilgrimage site for locals and believers alike. Considered a holy mountain or even a 'new' Jerusalem in a mystical sense, people flock to its forested sacred sites or *puwestos*. The objectives of this study are (1) to identify signs and symbols within the sacred space of Mount Banahaw; (2) to explain how signs and symbols within the mountain are able to convey various religious meanings to the worshippers and; (3) to understand how pilgrims derive and interpret the meanings associated with these signs and symbols. The author retraces a pilgrim's journey to the mystical place and attempts to discover the connection between the great expanse of Mount Banahaw and the various representations situated within the place.

Key Words: pilgrimage, *puwesto*, sign, symbol

Introduction

Local pilgrims and residents believe there is a strong parallel between biblical Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and Mount Banahaw which is located in Quezon Province on Luzon Island in the Philippines. Like Jerusalem, the mountain is strewn with signs and symbols associated with Jesus Christ and Christianity more generally. At the Santa Lucia Complex, located in Barangay Santa Lucia in Dolores, Quezon and the case study for this paper, one finds the familiar canonical names of *San Pablo*, *San Pedro*, *Santong Jacob*, and *San Gabriel*. At the Kinabuhayan Complex further away, one can identify sacred sites associated with the death of Jesus Christ, such as *Pinaggapusan* ('a place where one is tied'), *Yapak* ('footprint'), and *Pinagburulan* ('a place for holding a wake'). The symbolic transfer of aspects of the Holy Land to Mount Banahaw is transcendent in nature (Pesigan, 1992:10), and all these sacred places are associated with a potent life-force that charms believers and pilgrims alike.

This paper documents a personal exploration of spirituality and an analysis of the various signs and symbols associated with nature itself. The author retraced the steps usually performed by pilgrims whenever they visit Mount Banahaw in their quest for religious experience. Devotees follow an itinerary that normally includes pilgrimage to Santa Lucia and Kinabuhayan, two local villages or *barangays*^[1] located at the foot of Mount Banahaw in the

municipality of Dolores, Quezon province. The author undertook this spiritual journey to Mount Banahaw in the hope of fulfilling a promise to return to the sacred site and reflect on the mountain's enigmatic power. A semiotic approach was used to probe how the various signs and symbols linked to Mount Banahaw convey their meanings to people who journey to the interior of the mountain. This paper also aims to explain the phenomenon of how signs and symbols translate shared meanings among local pilgrims as the author endeavours to become one with the power mountain in pursuit of a transcendental experience. Apart from the local guide who accompanied the author to a number of sacred sites within the vast expanse of forestland, the author did not attempt to interview any devotees during the actual days of her religious journey. The study is principally based upon the author's own experience and interpretation.

Review of Literature

As a Roman Catholic and an observer looking in, how does the author interpret the religious nature of Mount Banahaw? What can the author deduce out of this journey to the holy mountain in relation to the many symbols and signs associated with the *puwestos*? How do pilgrims view the world 'inside' Mount Banahaw as compared to their viewpoint whenever they are 'outside' the sacred mountain?

In an extensive ethnographic study done in the municipality of Ilocos Sur, northern Philippines, Raul Perterra (1988:5) explored why some indigenous beliefs have persisted through time despite the arrival

1. In the Philippines, the *barangay* is the smallest administrative unit in the country.

of mainstream religions in the country. In many places in the Philippines, particularly in the provinces and countryside, the locals believe that spiritual beings usually prefer to inhabit certain types of abode, such as cave pits, gigantic trees, streams, unusual mounds, or forestlands. The locals usually appease these spirits by offering food, performing rituals, uttering prayers, and even avoiding the places where they are believed to dwell. Their experiences and relationships with these unseen forces generate local knowledge that reinforces their belief in the magical nature of this otherworldly non-human dimension. As Pertierra (1988:131) observes, 'relations with the supernatural world do not differ significantly from relations with the natural world'.

Another significant work on Philippine indigenous belief was undertaken by Bruno Bottinoglo (1995:5) on the Badjaos of Tawi-Tawi in Mindanao. Studying the Badjaos' unique system of thought and belief system, Bottinoglo noted that 'the model describing the relations with the spirits is deduced from the models of social behavior' (Bottinoglo, 1995: 91). For example, because spirits are like humans, 'one deals with the spirits as one deals with human beings' (Bottinoglo, 1995:91). This observation is quite similar to a study by Teresita Obusan on Filipino folk religion within a local religious society found in Mount Banahaw, the *Tatlong Persona Solo Dios*. As a result of mainstream religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) dominating the lesser known religions (e.g., folk and indigenous beliefs), scholars have tended to neglect local and popular religious expressions, even though they still serve as contributory factors in enriching a culture's worldview of faith and spirituality. As Obusan (1991:69) correctly points out:

In recent years there has been a growing recognition among scholars of religion that the understanding of a particular religion cannot be fully grasped apart from its history. The importance of this aspect cannot be minimized in the study of folk religion where the ancient beliefs of a particular area are inexorably linked with the current practices of folk religion.

In a study by John McAndrew (2001:38-39) on the significance of indigenous beliefs in the lives of the Cebuano-speaking people in Mindanao, he posits that people in non-Western societies (including The Philippines) normally understand their world and systematise their practical knowledge quite differently from people in Western societies. In fact, several authors have suggested that to study indigenous beliefs

in non-Western culture, one must appreciate the 'magical worldview' of the locals that is ordered by relationships and causations that are vastly different from the natural sciences. McAndrew (2001:39) adds that:

When a people view the world magically, they see it as composed of beings where Western man sees lifeless objects. Plants, animals, rocks, and stars are seen not as inanimate objects governed by the laws of nature, but as fellows with whom an individual or a community may have a more or less advantageous relationship...

As such, the practices and belief systems within the realm of magic remain detached from science and religion. The eminent social anthropologist James George Frazer refers to magic as

[a] spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art (Bough, 1922:12).

Indigenous cultures employ rituals and beliefs that are heavily influenced by supernatural powers. In the Philippines, local pilgrims believe that unseen beings inhabit certain *puwestos* in Mount Banahaw. As such, prayers are offered to gain favours or even appease these invisible entities. As McAndrew (2001:39) succinctly puts it, 'the beings of the magical world generally relate to and affect each other just as humans of that particular society.'

Geographical and Spiritual Backdrop

Mount Banahaw, a potentially active volcano, is located on the island of Luzon in the Philippines about 100 kilometres southeast of the capital city of Manila. Rising to about 2,170 meters (7,119 feet), this mystic mountain is nestled in Mounts Banahaw-San Cristobal Protected Landscape (MBSCPL) that spans the provinces of Quezon and Laguna in the Southern Tagalog Region. The MBSCPL has a total area of more than 10,000 hectares covering eight towns and two cities. From Quezon, it is surrounded by Dolores, Candelaria, Sariaya, Lucban, and Tayabas City. From Batangas, it is flanked by Majayjay, Nagcarlan, Liliw, Rizal, and San Pablo City (Department of Environment and Natural Resources, n.d.). Figure 1 situates Mount Banahaw and the various towns surrounding the mountain.

In 2004, the Philippine government closed certain areas in Mount Banahaw to enable its degraded vegetation and forest to recover and regenerate after

Figure 1 : Mount Banahaw and Its Surrounding Towns

(Mountain Forecast, 2019)

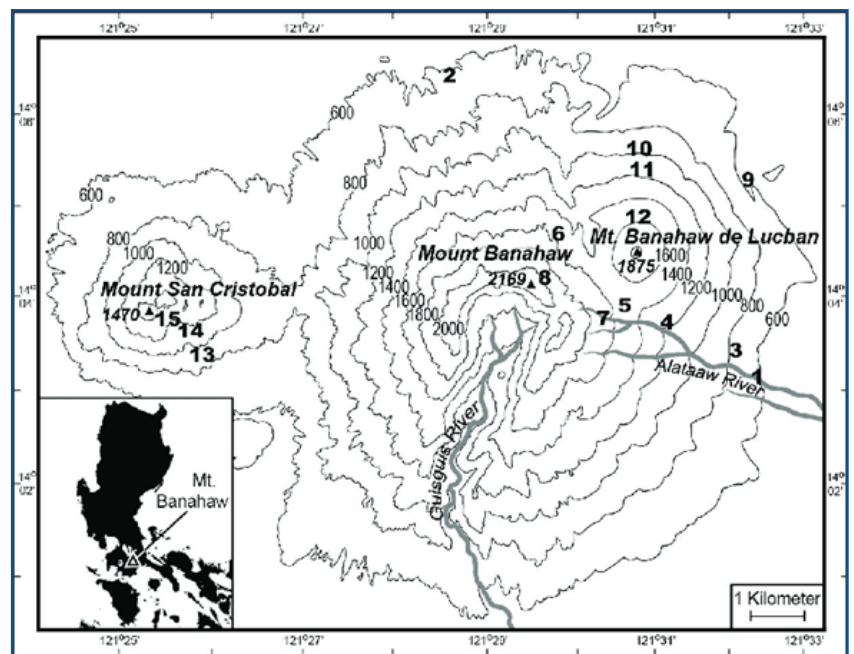
long periods of exploitation and negligence by pilgrims and hikers. The site was also closed because of the existence of bacteria in the local water source and the presence of enormous quantities of waste due to tourism and pilgrimage. In 2009, the MBSCPL was declared a protected landscape under Republic Act No. 9847 (The LAWPhil Project, n.d.). On March 6, 2018, a major forest fire caused by slash-and-burn agriculture in the region engulfed more than 35 hectares of grasslands in Candelaria, Quezon and a part of the MBSCPL (Mallari, 2018).

Mount Banahaw is the highest mountain in the region. Its three major peaks are Mount Banahaw de Tayabas, Mount Banahaw de Dolores, and Mount Banahaw de Lucban. Seven kilometres to its west is Mount San Cristobal, a dormant volcano rising to about 1,470 meters (4,823 feet), that is linked to Mount Banahaw by a narrow corridor near the town of Dolores. Historically, the last recorded eruption of Mount Banahaw occurred in 1721 which resulted in the formation of a crater lake (Gorospe, 1992:11). Figure 2 illustrates the major peaks of Mount Banahaw and the location of Mount San Cristobal.

The religious nature of Mount Banahaw and other local mountains has been well-documented in various historical and literary sources. Local myths and legends usually associate these mountains with certain gods, spirits, and deities, which are called *anitos* or *diwatas* by the locals. Foremost among Philippine sacred mountains are Mount Mayon in Albay (*Magayon*), Mount Makiling in Laguna (*Mariang Makiling*), and Mount Arayat in Pampanga (*Mariang Sinukuan*). Female deities are said to dwell in these mountains as they protect their abodes and allow people to use the natural resources. In the same manner, male deities inhabit other Philippine mountains, such as Mount San Cristobal in Quezon, Mount Kanlaon in Negros Island, and Mount Apo in Mindanao (Orillos, 2004:6-7).

Figure 2: Map of Mount Banahaw and Its Environs

www.freeworldmaps.net/asia/philippines/philippines-physical-map.jpg



(Balete, 2013)

Even before the arrival of the Spaniards in the Philippines, Mount Banahaw had been viewed by locals a sacred and spiritual place, especially with its numerous natural and geographical formations serving as places of habitation of unseen beings and forces, or *tagatanod* as the locals call them. Based on local legends, the location of specific *puwestos* in Mount Banahaw was revealed to Agripino Lontoc, a mystic, by a supernatural phenomenon called the 'Holy Voice' or *Santong Boses* - a mountain spirit (Gorospe, 1992:26; Pesigan, 1992:14). In most cases, the *Santong Boses* also became the prime entity that guided the formulation of doctrines and teachings of local religious groups that were established in Mount Banahaw (Marasigan, 1985:22-23; Obusan, 1991:73-74).

During the 17th century, Spanish authorities reported local pilgrims flocking to the mountain caves to perform rituals associated with animistic practices, demonstrating that Mount Banahaw was a place of pilgrimage to many townsfolk (Ileto, 1997:67-68). Moreover, the mountain has been a safe refuge for local dissidents during the most tumultuous periods in Philippine history. There are also extant records from the 19th century of several religious and military leaders who lived in the mountain and continued their personal and revolutionary struggles from the forested areas in the mountain. These include Apolinario de la Cruz, Apolonio Purgatorio, and Januario Labios (Ileto, 1997:62-73). Most notably, Mount Banahaw served as stronghold of the messianic movement *Cofradia de San Jose* (Confraternity of St. Joseph), founded by the charismatic Apolinario dela Cruz or Hermano (Brother) Puli (or Pule) in 1832, to counter the Catholic Church for the racial discrimination he experienced from Spanish priests. This religious society believed that the mountain was both holy and noble land.

Presently, religious groups situated at the foot of the mountain believe that the Philippines, and in particular Mount Banahaw, is the 'anointed one' or *axis mundi* of the world on par with the Holy Land (Mata, 2004:97-98). Principally, Mount Banahaw is viewed as sacred ground not only by the numerous religious groups that flourish in the area, called locally as *kapatiran* and *samahan*, but also by many other Filipinos who flock to the mountain, most specially during the Christian Lenten period (Obusan, 1991:72). Some of the religious groups currently operating in the area include the *Ciudad Mistica de Dios*, *Spiritual Filipino Catholic Church*, *Camara Baja*, *Bathalismo*, and *Adarnista*. While *Ciudad Mistica de Dios* has been studied by a handful of academic scholars and has been published

about in a number of sources (Villero, 2010; Brazal, 2018; Dayo et al., 2018), there is still a dearth of knowledge pertaining to the exact number of religious groups that abound in the locality of Mount Banahaw. Obviously, more studies should be done in this area in order to fill this gap.

Methodology

The site of pilgrimage under study is the Santa Lucia Complex mentioned above. In a census done in 2015, the estimated population of the locality was less than five thousand people representing almost 16% of the population of Dolores. The elevation of the site is estimated at 352.3 meters (1,155.8 feet) above sea level (PhilAtlas, 2019). Situated within the Santa Lucia Complex are the numerous natural and geographic formations usually considered by devotees as sacred and supernatural.

Firstly, this study aims to identify the various signs and symbols associated with these formations, such as waterfalls, rock shelters, and cave pits, within the sacred context of Mount Banahaw. Secondly, the author aims to explain how signs and symbols within the mountain are able to convey various religious meanings to the local pilgrims as they perform their rituals within the holy mountain. Lastly, this study aims to understand how pilgrims and visitors interpret these representations for their own religious consumption.

The study employs an ethnography of Mount Banahaw and its immediate environs, particularly, Barangay Santa Lucia in Dolores, Quezon. Utilising an etic approach, the author explored the local culture and society situated within and around the holy mountain. In the author's interaction with the local community, she was ably supervised by a guide (or *pator*) throughout the duration of her stay in the locality. Through participant observation, the author became a living witness to the mountain's aura of mysticism as she personally experienced all the travails of a pilgrim's journey.

As a researcher, it was imperative to gain the trust of the author's personal guide and the community. The author decided not to use a voice recorder or video camera during the entirety of her conversations with the guide to avoid any kind of uneasiness or discomfort. In some cases, a taped conversation with a semblance of formality prevents a researcher from obtaining truthful answers from a respondent. As such, a simple notetaking throughout the duration of her

journey sufficed. With a free flowing exchange of ideas, the author was able to secure the trust and confidence of the guide as they proceeded with the journey. This method of gaining one's trust is locally referred to as *pakikipalagayang-loob*.

Small talk usually leads to insightful discussions. As pilgrims embark on their trek, an effectual interpersonal communication is maintained. Throughout the journey, the researcher became acquainted with new ideas and then asked questions for a better and deeper understanding. Similar to familiarising one's self with a certain situation, this is known locally as the *pakapa-kapa* method. In addition, the plain observation approach or *pagmamasid* is also employed by the researcher. A study conducted by Pesigan (1992:3-4) on Mount Banahaw notes that using a certain vantage point (or *durungawan*) is essential when trying to discern the nature of things, whether one looking passively as an insider or viewing a phenomenon as an outsider from a privileged position. Incidentally, the term 'Banahaw' comes from the word '*ban-aw*' meaning 'a vantage point to a high position' (Pesigan, 1992:171). Lastly, the author frequently took photos of the various *puwestos* with permission from the guide.

Document analysis was also used in formulating the necessary framework for this study and in verifying information collected in the field. Secondary sources were consulted, specifically local studies concerning indigenous beliefs and spirituality and literature on Mount Banahaw and its mysticism. Local studies on the existence and history of minor religious groups around Mount Banahaw were also utilised. The study was also guided by the semiotic approach employed by the likes of Charles Sanders Peirce (1994) and Charles W. Morris (1971) as the researcher explained the singularity of her Mount Banahaw experience. Using these approaches, this paper deals mostly with the researcher's personal spiritual journey and the semiotic analysis of signs and symbols found in Mount Banahaw.^[2]

The Initial Encounter

The author's first exposure to Mount Banahaw happened in 2005 during an educational trip as part of an undergraduate course at the University of the Philippines Manila. The course examined the life and works of the Filipino national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, who is revered by some Filipinos (also called Rizalistas) as they believe the local hero is a reincarnation of Jesus Christ (Covar, 1974:428). It is within this context that

the class had this exposure trip to Mount Banahaw in order to witness first-hand the presence of Rizalista groups in the area.

Following the millenarian tradition,^[2] the biographical sketches of Jesus Christ and Dr. Rizal show certain similarities in their way of life, their colonial backdrop, and the nature of their suffering. However, various Rizalista sects have differing and opposing views on the divinity of Dr. Rizal. Apart from being considered a local Christ, others see him as God himself, a second son of God, an angel, or a mere spiritual guide (Foronda, 1961:81). Some believers even hold the view that Dr. Rizal did not die when he was executed way back in 1896; rather, they believe that he will return in the future to save his followers from sorrow and misery, much like Jesus Christ will do at his 'Second Coming' (Elesterio, 1991:108). This further validates the mystical transfer of Jerusalem to The Philippines.

As an undergraduate student, the author was amazed by the uniqueness of the various structures that have been built by different religious groups in Mount Banahaw, such as the *Ciudad Mistica de Dios* and the *Spiritual Filipino Catholic Church*. The class interviewed several resource persons who educated the listeners on the origin and nature of their beliefs, their system of rituals, and their spiritual view of Dr. Rizal. The class then visited *puwestos* revered not only by Rizalistas but also by other pilgrims who flock to the holy mountain. As a local pilgrim (or *namumuwesto*), it was during this point that the author became very much interested in the many sacred sites situated within Mount Banahaw, including its waterfalls, streams, rock formations, peaks, and caves. Since that exposure trip was only one day in duration, the group was not able to visit most of the locations.

The Second Journey

It took the author almost thirteen years to revisit Mount Banahaw. It so happened that the author's return to the holy mountain happened to fall on the 30th of December 2018 while the Philippines celebrated the 122nd death anniversary of Dr. Rizal. A further visit was made two weeks later on the 13th of January 2019. This coincided with the author's family going to visit Majayjay, the hometown of the author's father, which is approximately 1.5 hours away from Dolores which

2. One limitation of this study is that the phenomenon of millenarian groups that abound the area, including their historical beginnings, is not discussed.

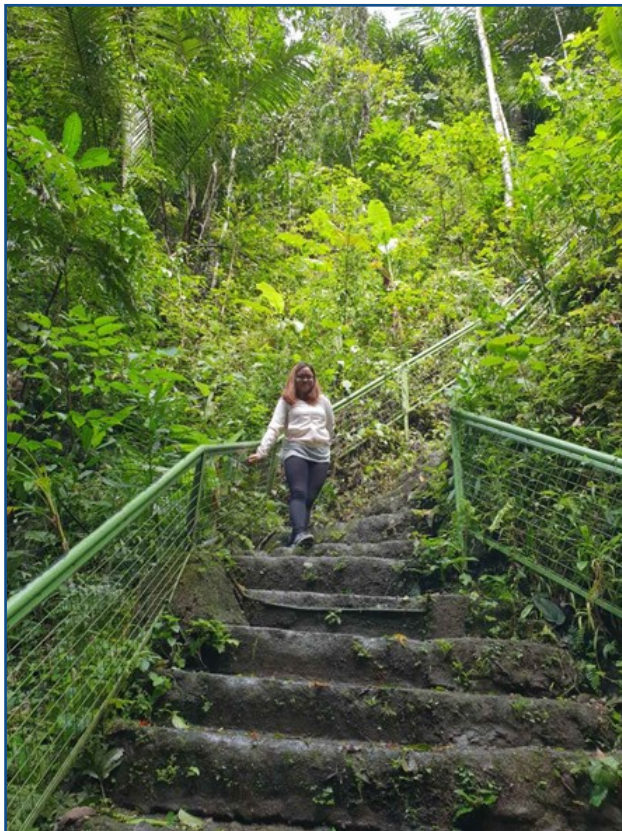
is one of the gateways to Mount Banahaw. The author was able to take a detour to Mount Banahaw for another visit. This visit helped the author to understand better the mysteries of the many sacred sites found in the area. The author arrived at Barangay Santa Lucia in Dolores around nine o'clock in the morning, and, with a local guide accompanying her, the author, began her pilgrimage to the sacred mountain and performed her very own *pamumuwesto*.

Despite heavy rains brought about by a tropical depression which resulted in tremendous flooding and catastrophic landslides in the southern Philippines, the author-pilgrim was still hopeful that good weather would await on the day of her journey. Her guide, Francisco (or Iko for short), was a member of the religious group *Ciudad Mistica de Dios*. The author was introduced to Iko by a colleague who frequently visits Mount Banahaw. Iko first arrived in Dolores when he was just sixteen years old. He fell in love with the place, and eventually became a member of *Ciudad Mistica de Dios*. Iko was thirty-eight years old at the time of the author's pilgrimage.

Iko advised the author to bring candles, a match, and drinking water on the day of the visit. Before the actual trek, they successively passed by the two holy temples of *Ciudad Mistica de Dios* to offer some prayers (or *dasal*) to their Mother God (or *Diyos Ina*) and to petition for safe travel and good weather. Surprisingly, the weather was clear that day and the rain had stopped. Along the way, the author noticed the presence of small temples and shrines built by several religious sects in the area. One conspicuous object that can be found along the trail is a historical marker dedicated to the local revolutionary hero, Macario Sakay, who was killed in 1907 during the American occupation of the Philippines.

It took almost thirty minutes to reach the first *puwesto*. Before the author made the ascent to the holy mountain, she had to first cleanse and purify herself in the waters of Santa Lucia River and Twin Falls. During the author's first visit to the area she had encountered a variety of stores (*sari-sari*) scattered in the vicinity, where local sellers would try to entice visitors to purchase amulets and talismans that could be blessed in the 'holy' waters below. At the time of the author's pilgrimage, all these stores had disappeared. To reach the first *puwesto*, the author and her guide descended into the mountain by way of concrete steps (269 in total) (see Figure 3) since the river is located below Barangay Santa Lucia. Because trees and vines abound in the area, one cannot see the river from the initial descent. However, one can hear the rumbling of the water from below. According to Iko, devotees usually chant religious songs (or *dalit*) while they go down and up the steps. These vigil songs consist of hymns of praise to the *Diyos Ina* as well as expressions of joyousness and sacrifice being experienced by devotees and pilgrims (Pesigan, 1992:55-58). It took about an hour to complete the entire steps with occasional stops along the way. Upon reaching the river, Iko immediately lit a candle and placed it on the altar of *San Miguel*. A devotee can also pray in front of a huge boulder of rock and *puwesto* nearby, called *Piedra Mental*, before taking a bath at the twin falls. These waterfalls, the *Talon ng Lalake* and *Talon ng Babae*, are important *puwestos* in the area. Bathing at the Santa Lucia waters symbolises the washing away of sins. Along the riverbanks, the author found other *puwestos* that are also significant to devotees, including the much smaller falls *Tubig ng Inang Santisima*, *Pitong Kanununuan* (a *puwesto* for healing skin diseases), and *Pinto ng Kaluluwa* (a *puwesto* particularly important during All-Saints' Day).

Figure 3: A portion of the 269 concrete steps going down to the Santa Lucia River and Twin Falls in Dolores, Quezon, Philippines



© 2018 Author.

After cleansing in the Santa Lucia River, the author ascended the same steps *en route* to other sacred sites within Mount Banahaw. Naturally, going up was a lot harder than going down the steps. The climb was basically a test of physical endurance and mental resolve to reach the top. Upon reaching the top, the author walked for about twenty minutes, passing a junction marked by a 'national park' sign. Upon reaching two nearby *puwestos* - *Kaban ni San Isidro* (*Kamaling ng Bayan*) and the *Santong Jacob* composed of giant rock boulders - Iko again lit some candles and offered prayers. According to Iko, the well (or *balon*) inside *Santong Jacob* possessed healing powers, and it is believed that by bathing in the well, seven years of a person's sins are forgiven (Gorospe, 1992:31). Before anyone can reach the well inside, however, they have to overcome the fear of descending twenty feet below from an entrance so constricted that this site could certainly incite fear to first-timers or people who are claustrophobic. The author did not attempt to enter *Santong Jacob*, as she felt she was not emotionally prepared for the descent. The author found the *balon* of *Santong Jacob* one of the most fascinating sites in Mount Banahaw. According to one source, this *puwesto* was discovered in 1911 by Amador Suarez, one of the past prominent leaders of *Ciudad Mistica de Dios*, during his visit to Mount Banahaw in his search to find the religious leader Agripino Lontok (Pesigan, 1992:23).

After another twenty-minute climb, the author was at another revered site - the *Prisentahan*. In this *puwesto*, which is a cave seven feet deep and easily accessible via an installed iron ladder, the author had to 'present' (or *presenta* in Filipino) herself to San Pablo and San Pedro by going down into a pit seven feet deep, where candles are lit and prayers given. From the *Prisentahan*, the author proceeded with her climb, passing by numerous sacred sites such as the *puwestos* of *San Mateo*, *San Francisco*, and *Angelito*, and the caves of *San Juan* and *San Francisco*. A fifteen-minute trek from *Prisentahan* brought them to the *Ina ng Awa*, which is considered in location traditions as the mystical and spiritual center of Mount Banahaw (Gorospe, 1992:36). What is astonishing about this *puwesto* is the presence of an enormous rock boulder jutting above the cave entrance (see Figure 4). The author was amazed by this natural rock formation; there was a feeling of calmness inside despite some anxiety before entering the shrine due to that massive rock hanging overhead. Candles were again lit and prayers said in front of the altar inside the *Ina ng Awa*.

Figure 4: The local guide and the massive rock boulder hanging outside the cave entrance of *Ina ng Awa* in Dolores, Quezon, Philippines



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A pilgrimage to Mount Banahaw is never complete without entering the Cave of Judgment, or the *Husgado* (see Figure 5), which is about a ten-minute trek from the *Ina ng Awa*. Although considered as one of the more interesting sites within the mountain, the author has yet to find a source that could explain its origin and discovery. The *Husgado* is a labyrinth about fifty feet long, but the rocky and circuitous route inside makes the passage appear longer than it is. During her undergraduate year, the author recalled how difficult it was for her to extricate herself from *Husgado*, and that it took her almost two hours to exit the cave. To be able to judge (*husga* in Filipino) one's conscience (*kalooban*), one must pass through the *Husgado* (Pesigan, 1992:148-149). A regular or experienced devotee could normally negotiate their way out of the *Husgado* in less than an hour. A devotee exiting this tight passageway unscathed means that he or she is a good-natured individual and has a clean conscience (*malinis na kalooban*), while a devotee who experiences much difficulty inside the cave, such as getting a scratch or wound, implies the need for repentance. Iko asked the author if she wanted to enter

Figure 5: The cave entrance going inside *Husgado* in Dolores, Quezon, Philippines



© 2018 Author

the *Husgado*. The author hesitated and initially declined because she could still very well remember the first time she entered the cave when she was a student. Back then she experienced exhaustion, fear, anxiety, and embarrassment at the end of the tunnel when she was 'judged' by the cave. On her second trip in January, she was just about able to muster the needed courage and strength to once again enter *Husgado* when she returned to Mount Banahaw on this trip. Admittedly, she again had a difficult time navigating herself inside the pit. However, as she exited the labyrinth after almost an hour of ordeal, there came a sense of spiritual fulfillment inside her.

The final destination was the *Santos Kalbaryo*, where one can find three standing wooden crosses supported by layers of rock boulders. From *Husgado*, it took more than an hour to reach this rocky section of Mount Banahaw which is located at about 215 meters (704 feet) above sea level (Gorospe, 1992:39). The author found the trail going to *Santos Kalbaryo* to be one of the most difficult aspects of the visit to undertake. After negotiating a relatively easy stretch of flat plains with patches of trees, the ascent gradually became steeper as she neared the shrine, walking through a vast expanse of volcanic rocks. The author also picked up stones as she ascended. When the author finally

Table 1 : List of Sacred Sites Visited by the Author-Pilgrim

Dates of Pilgrimage	Name of Sacred Site or <i>Puwesto</i>	Principal Feature	Rituals and Practices Performed	Religious or Emotional Outcome
December 30, 2018 and January 13, 2019	Santa Lucia River	Flowing river	Chanting of vigil songs; lighting of candle atop boulder of rocks; immersion and bathing on the river	Self-cleansing and purification; akin to 'sign of the cross' performed by Roman Catholic Church members
December 30, 2018	Twin Falls (Talon ng Lalake and Talon ng Babae)	Small waterfalls	Bathing in the falls	Self-cleansing and purification
December 30, 2018	Kaban ni San Isidro	Huge boulder of rock	Lighting of candle; prayer offering	Utterance of prayer for safe journey
December 30, 2018	Santong Jacob	Well inside a pit	Descent inside the pit; bathing in the well	Forgiveness of sins
December 30, 2018 and January 13, 2019	Prisentahan	Twin caves	Descent inside the pit; lighting of candle; prayer offering	Presentation of one's self as a pilgrim
December 30, 2018 and January 13, 2019	Ina ng Awa	Cave	Lighting of candle; prayer offering	The mountain's mystical and spiritual center
January 13, 2019	Husgado	Cave labyrinth	Passage in and out of the cave	Judgement of one's deed and conscience
December 30, 2018	Santos Kalbaryo	Wooden crosses	Lighting of candles; prayer offering	Forgiveness of sins

reached the *puwesto*, lighting candles and saying prayers were again part of the ritual. This location offers a great view of the lowland towns from its elevated vantage position. The stones the author had picked up symbolised the weight (or *bigat* in Filipino) of her sins that had been forgiven as a result of her pilgrimage to this *puwesto*. This was the end of her personal journey.

The author's *pamumuwesto* at the Santa Lucia Complex was now complete. The descent involved retracing the trail back to Barangay Santa Lucia, which was reached around 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Table 1 summarises the pilgrim's experience as she visited various *puwestos* in Mount Banahaw on two separate occasions.

The Use of Signs and Symbols

The use of signs and symbols is very significant in many cultures and societies. They help convey and transfer knowledge, understanding, values, beliefs, attitudes, and viewpoints to succeeding generations. In his study of religious symbols, Eduardo Domingo explained that for the Filipinos, the cosmic, natural, and human realities appear as great symbols of the divine, supernatural, and transcendent. He then further explains that

Filipino religious symbols continue to express the Filipino consciousness, an outlook that does not clearly differentiate between religion and everyday life (Domingo, 1991:52).

For academics, semiotics involves the formal study of signs and symbols and their meanings within a particular society and the key roles they play in communication. Since humans are part of societies, they regularly search for deeper meanings in their communication through the utilisation and interpretation of signs and symbols. A symbol is used to represent something else and normally derives its meaning primarily from the structure in which it appears (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). For example, in terms of religious meanings, people see the cross as a symbol of Christianity, the crescent for Islam, and the menorah for Judaism. These symbols can have an inherent value that is separate from what they symbolise. While a symbol is more open to interpretation and has more semantic content, a sign is much more straightforward representation of something that is easy to describe in other ways (Hendry, 1999: 83). In fact, a sign may have an established meaning for a particular group of people and it may be used in place of words. The author

believes that all *puwestos* inside Mount Banahaw, which are charged with a plethora of religious meanings, are actually comprised of signs and symbols.

While every society is defined by a set of symbols, the author was interested in what anthropologists call 'public symbols,' or those symbols shared by members of a particular social group. Joy Hendry (1999:82) explains that public symbols

express aspects of the ideology of the group, understood within a specific social and moral system, and the same symbols may mean something quite different to members of another social group.

Part of the author's Mount Banahaw experiences included trying to answer questions regarding the shared meanings of the various *puwestos* within the sacred mountain as perceived by the pilgrims and believers themselves. How are the various signs and symbols in Mount Banahaw able to convey religious meanings to the observers? How effective are these codes in terms of reinforcing one's spirituality and even religious experience *vis-à-vis* the enigma of Mount Banahaw as a power mountain?

In Peirce's semiotic theory, a triadic relationship exists between signs or representamens, objects, and interpretants: A sign, regardless of how simple or complex it may be, is an entity that embodies properties. It may be subjected to numerous interpretations before its actual decoding. An object is what the sign embodies or refers to the sign can only represent the object. An object does not have to be a material thing. The interpretant is the reference that allows people to interpret and decode the sign (Lanir, 2012). Peirce's theory is very pragmatic in the sense that the context in which signs are constructed and decoded are always taken into consideration.

What people call 'symbols' in popular usage are regarded by semioticians as 'signs' of some kind, but many of them would not technically be classified as purely 'symbolic' (Chandler, 2007:38). For Peirce, symbols are based purely on conventional associations. He adds that a symbol is

a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object (Chandler, 2007: 39).

How does Pierce's triadic framework explain the mechanism on how signs and symbols translate their religious meanings to the pilgrims? Take for example the curious case of *Husgado*, the labyrinth-like cave that tests a person's character depending on one's physical condition when he or she has successfully exited the pit. The term (or even the sound) *Husgado* acts as the sign or representamen. Strictly speaking, the term *Husgado* is entirely separate from the object it signifies - the object being a cave composed of volcanic rocks, about 50-feet long, that is so constricted that it poses a considerable physical challenge to any pilgrim inside the cave pit. Henceforth, *Husgado* is open to several possible interpretations, as it could mean a place of judgement when one is 'inside' the holy mountain, or it could be a local criminal court wherein an accused is tried and sentenced, or even a commentary radio program that talks about salvation of life. The key here is the third element, the interpretant, which decodes the relationship or even possible significance between the sign and the object. A pilgrim visiting Mount Banahaw would know for a fact that if a person wants to be 'spiritually' examined, he or she must enter the *Husgado*. The associated meaning of *Husgado* is thus, shared by all believers within the context of the holy mountain. The pilgrim as an interpretant translates the sign into its supposed religious meaning.

On the other hand, Morris' analysis of signs postulates that in order to understand the uses and effects of signs, one must understand the ways in which signs influence

social behaviour (Scott, 2004). In his semiotics, relationships exist between signs, objects, and meanings. Simply put, 'the sign represents the object, or referent, in the mind of the interpreter' (Oregon State University, n.d.). Signs must possess three factors to guide people in their interpretation of meaning. First, the sign must have a designative aspect that directs the interpreter to a certain object. Second, it must have an appraisive aspect to emphasise the object's characteristics that could assist in the interpreter's evaluation. Lastly, it should acquire a prescriptive aspect so that an interpreter can act in a specified way.

The associated meanings of all signs and symbols in Mount Banahaw must be understood and shared by all pilgrims who flock to the holy mountain. From the previously mentioned junction in Mount Banahaw that leads to other *puwestos*, there lies a human-made triangular flat structure made out of concrete depicting the 'All-Seeing Eye' (see Figure 6), more popularly known in the Christian tradition as the 'Eye of Providence'. This striking sign directs any pilgrim who passes by the trail to have a look at this Christian iconography (the designative aspect). It was built precisely on a spot that serves as an avenue to other sacred sites. Quite noticeable in this sign is an eye that represents the eye of God overseeing humanity (the appraisive aspect). From here on, any pilgrim must act in a way that is appropriate and suitable in the eyes of God while he or she performs the sacred journey inside the holy mountain (the prescriptive aspect). A pilgrim

Figure 6 : The 'Eye of Providence' in Dolores, Quezon, Philippines



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then responds to that particular symbol in three ways: (1) the pilgrim becomes cognizant of the sign (the perception stage); (2) the pilgrim translates the sign and then opts to take action on it (the manipulative stage); and (3) the pilgrim responds by keeping in mind his or her rightful actions while making the sacred journey (the consummation stage).

Context is very significant in the determination of a symbol's meaning. For example, both the Daranak Falls and Pagsanjan Falls may be popular tourist destinations in the Philippines, but they do not exude an aura of spirituality when compared with the Twin Falls in Santa Lucia, even though the *Tubig ng Ama* and *Buhok ng Ina* pale in comparison to the two previously mentioned falls in terms of beauty and scale. Philippine caves that abound with fossils and artifacts, such as those in Tabon, Manunggul, and Callao, are quite different when compared to *Husgado* and the other cave pits within Mount Banahaw in terms of sacredness and religiosity. While a handful of rock shelters can be found in the Philippines - Macahambus, Biak-na-Bato, and El Nido to name a few - perhaps none come close to the spiritual nature of *Ina ng Awa* within the holy mountain. Although many other mountains in the Philippines are also sacred and legendary - such as Arayat, Makiling, Mayon, Kabunian, and Pulag - no other mountain is inhabited and venerated by as many religious groups as the mystical Mount Banahaw (Gorospe, 1992:11). In 2018, about 7,000 people flocked to Mount Banahaw during the Lenten season (Mallari, 2018). No other Philippine mountain can claim a similar occurrence where thousands of people perform a pilgrimage to a particular place. Indeed, Mount Banahaw is a power mountain, a Holy Land, and a 'new' Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Mount Banahaw as a holy mountain can be viewed as one colossal sign that effectively translates its religious meaning to any pilgrim visiting its many sacred *puwestos*. As noted earlier, the transfer of Jerusalem to Mount Banahaw is a supernatural and magical one. Again, one is reminded of McAndrew's study that for people to fully understand the belief system of non-Western societies, they must be able to grasp their magical worldview within the context of the power mountain. As McAndrew (2001:39) bluntly puts it, the 'dynamic of the magical world is power'. In reference to public symbols that are shared by a group of people, it goes without saying that pilgrims who journey to Mount Banahaw must be able to correctly interpret

what these symbols are trying to convey in order for them to perform any ritual or practices associated with the *puwestos*. Ignorance of these symbols diminishes the religiosity and mysticism of the power mountain.

For the many Rizalista groups that thrive in the area, the intersection of the religiosity of Mount Banahaw and the parallelisms between Dr. Rizal and Jesus Christ are fully understood by their members. While Mount Banahaw has been venerated since early times, the emergence of a heroic character in the midst of suffering of the oppressed people for three centuries of Spanish rule in the Philippines (1565-1896) reinforced the idea that Mount Banahaw is truly a representation of their ideals and aspirations for the future. As a case in point, for the Laguna-based millenarian group *Iglesia Watawat ng Lahi*, the re-emergence of Dr. Rizal (or the other 'Second Coming') will usher a sorrow-free society and a new kind of paradise for their devoted members (Elesterio 1991:108). In his study of a Banahaw religious leader Agapito Illustrisimo, the author Vicente Marasigan (1985:20) notes that

more important than scientific historicity and theological definition of fanaticism is the need for indigenous symbols among the oppressed, symbols that are within, or at least close to, the area of ultimate concern.

The author recommends a general study of current religious groups operating within the locality of Mount Banahaw in order to update existing literature dealing with the phenomenon of millenarianism and other religious groups in the Philippines.

As a final note, what does the author make of her pilgrimage to Mount Banahaw?

As a member of the Roman Catholic Church, it does not matter if the author does or does not believe in the mysticism of the holy mountain. When one journeys into nature, he or she becomes one with nature itself. The author has personally witnessed the devotion of believers in all the *puwestos* whenever they light their candles and offer prayers. Visiting sacred sites is never easy, especially for the elderly or sick people who are asking for the forgiveness of their sins, cure for their illnesses, or who are fulfilling a promise (or *panata* in Filipino). The more than two hundred concrete steps down to and up from Santa Lucia River provide an intense physical challenge to all devotees. Likewise, *Santong Jacob* can give pilgrims the scare of their lives as they go down the pit. Meanwhile, *Husgado* is a test of endurance and mental toughness for anyone inside the labyrinth. Lastly, the trail to *Santos Kalbaryo*

presents another enormous task to accomplish for any pilgrim. The American scientist Edward O. Wilson once said that 'nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual satisfaction' (McCrum, 2017). Indeed, everyone is a resident of nature, and earth is home. Nature gives people sustenance, and the earth is alive. Nature breathes life and is the giver of life. While all humans and animals have life, many believe that other inhabitants of the world - trees, rocks, fire, and water - possess life too. As such, humanity lives in an intricate, intimate, interrelated, ecology of souls (Harvey, 1997:144). It is not surprising therefore that the appeal of Mount Banahaw as a revered sanctuary and power mountain shall remain in the hearts and mind of its devotees in Philippine society for many generations to come.

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